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SUBJECT: mp 97 Religious Services and SOs  
DATE: 12/25/2016 06:11:25 AM

mp 97 Religious Services and SOs 12-23-16

One thing about coming home I will not be able to experience for a while and possibly ever: attending my local church service. I still can't wrap my head around that reality. One constant in my life before coming to prison is singing in a church choir. For a *time I will have to do without that resource*. A friend of mine tried to go to a local Zen Center after leaving prison, but was asked not to return because they have a policy against allowing sex offenders from attending.

The UUworld had an article on Sex offenders and church in 2014. It quoted a consultant saying that churches should set up policies that protect the children without restricting access to whole classes of people many of which have a low risk of reoffending (Sex offenders have the lowest level of reoffense of all felons). A simple policy of all groups of children should be supervised by multiple adults (two or more) would achieve a safe environment without restricting access.

One of the issues many SOs face in trying to reintegrate into our communities is the very common restriction against attending religious services (because of the presence of children). It is unfortunate in many ways. One of the central transformative organizations in any community is our religious communities. For many ex prisoners, they form the central tool in reintegration with assistance in housing, employment, and socialization in addition to existential meaning.

But that will not be available for me for a time. How long? Not sure, theoretically it could be forever. Will have to wait till my probation officer and/or judge decides that I am safe to allow back into the community. As well as hope political leaders decide to make a statement how tough they are by making a law that explicitly denies my access. Most of the problems with denial of access have to do with local or state laws that treat all SOs as similarly dangerous.

That is a shame because my religious community has been central in my process of recovery. Unitarian Universalist Associations' Church of the Larger Fellowship has supported me through their prison ministry, newsletters, magazines and book distribution and correspondence classes. I suppose that will have to continue to be my church when I get out for a period of time any way.

What I will miss is the music. I sang in the choir at every church I have attended including the last four UU congregations. Choir singing has been a primary spiritual practice. A place I can integrate my whole body in the religious experience - mind, emotions, and physical sensations. That is not something I can replicate in written form.

At a minimum, I have my meditation practice which integrates my whole body. I plan to start a mindfulness based sitting group which I can make adults only. Mindfulness meditation serves the same role as my singing practice prior to prison. I will have to be content with meditation my primary spiritual practice.

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